



SOFTWARE NEWS

■ INTRODUCING AVALANCHE

Microsoft is developing an alternative to BitTorrent, the high-speed peer-to-peer file-sharing software. The Microsoft version, Avalanche, will have built-in digital rights management (DRM), though. Microsoft said that Avalanche improves on BitTorrent's swarming technology. In this system, as soon as a client has part of a file, it's made available to the network. Someone can then download a file from multiple sources at the same time, which increases download speeds.

Users have been known to struggle with the 'rarest bit'. A single computer may have the only copy of the last part of a file, which slows down the final download segment. But Microsoft's Avalanche has been designed to get around this by splitting a file into blocks. Clients download random blocks out of order and reassemble them at the end. The technique should speed up downloads.

Microsoft sees the technology being applied to video and TV on demand as well as the distribution of films to buy or rent. Trials of Avalanche are expected to begin in 2006.

■ CATALYST CONVERSION

ATI has updated its Catalyst software for its range of graphics processors. It has claimed a number of firsts for version 5.6, including plug-and-play HDTV connectivity, monthly software upgrades for notebooks and a simpler Linux driver installer for open source use. ATI also claimed sizeable performance improvements with graphics-intensive games such as Doom 3, Chronicles of Riddick and Halo.

"With the launch of Catalyst 5.6, we take software innovation to the next level, broadening our footprint to support notebook PCs and defining a new standard for video control and usability," said Ben Bar-Haim, vice-president of software at ATI Technologies.

The software also enables you to make on-the-fly adjustments to video quality and view the results through a real-time video preview. A setup wizard optimises for the best video quality automatically, making it ideal for novice users. For enthusiasts, there is access to more advanced setup options, controlling features such as de-interlacing, hue and gamma. Catalyst 5.6 can be freely downloaded from www.atl.com.



REVIEW MUSIC PRODUCTION SOFTWARE

PROPELLERHEAD Reason 3

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £300 inc VAT

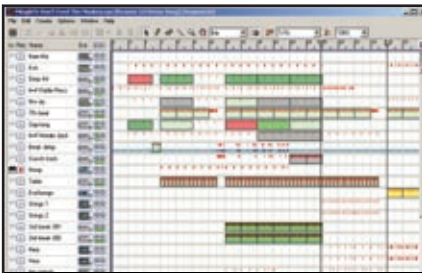
SUPPLIER www.dv247.com

DETAILS www.propellerheads.se

Having a top-specification recording studio inside a PC is a fairly new concept, but standards are already in place to allow different types of software to work together. An audio sequencer such as Cubase or Sonar provides the essential recording and mixing tools, which can be augmented with virtual synthesisers and effects in the form of VST or DirectX plug-ins.

Propellerhead has its own way of doing things. Reason is a closed system with a high-quality but non-expandable set of synthesisers. Its mixing facilities and effects are well specified but, again, they cannot be expanded. The sequencer used to record performances and arrange tracks offers only basic MIDI editing and no audio recording/editing facilities. As such, it's not possible to record or import live performances made with a microphone. However, Reason can run in tandem with another audio sequencer that supports ReWire (including Cubase and Sonar), so it acts like a plug-in. ReWire doesn't integrate the two programs as neatly as VST or DirectX plug-in technology, though.

Reason's unorthodox approach is offset by some of the best-sounding synthesisers available. Its analogue-style and granular synthesisers sound gutsy and powerful and the collection of samplers, which specialise in drum hits, drum loops and tuned instruments, come with classy, fresh sample libraries and plenty of sound-sculpting potential. The general-purpose sampler and its orchestral sound



Song arranging still lacks the refinement and audio recording capability of rival software



The MClass suite is a valuable addition to Reason's effects modules



With its customisable skins, the new Combinator module is impressive visually as well as sonically

bank are highlights and they compare well to standalone programs that cost as much as the entire Reason package.

MULTIPLE CHOICE

Version 3 comes with a Combinator module. This provides a shell in which other modules can be layered and connected in just about any conceivable way. It's now possible to play two or more synthesiser modules at once from the same MIDI keyboard. The preset library shows how powerful the Combinator is and there is a stunning array of rich, exciting sounds. Reason already offered flexible signal routing with its virtual patch cords, but the Combinator makes it easier to get stuck into experimental sound design.

The other key update is the MClass Mastering Suite. This comprises EQ, compression, stereo width and limiting effects. These are great for processing finished mixes, and the EQ and compression modules in particular are handy for processing individual sounds too.

With so many synth modules to choose from, it is fortunate you can now browse the presets by sound type, regardless of which module created it. Best of all, simply clicking on a name loads the preset for instant auditioning. This eliminates the rigmarole of loading a module, browsing its presets, then deleting it to try a different module's presets. Another great timesaver is support for a wide range of MIDI controllers and keyboards. The software automatically recognised our Edirol keyboard and assigned functions without any effort. Reassigning controls to other functions is straightforward, too.

The MIDI sequencer is also straightforward. It's fine for most purposes and elegantly handles controller data for recording knob tweaks and mix automation. But niceties such as groove quantising are absent. Reason's main weakness is its inability to record audio alongside MIDI performances.

What Reason can do, it does brilliantly. It's inspiring and fun to use and we wish it was the only piece of software we needed to take a project from start to finish. For those writing purely electronic music, this may be the case. However, anyone who wants to add a live vocal or guitar part will also need a ReWire-compatible host program. All the same, the quality and breadth of Reason's synthesisers mean it's still money well spent.

Ben Pitt

✓ New effects and the Combinator module make Reason sound better than ever

✗ Basic sequencing tools; still no audio input or VST support

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 300MHz Pentium III processor, 256MB RAM, 2GB disk space

REVIEW INTERIOR DESIGN PROGRAM**FOCUS
MULTIMEDIA****Your 3D Home Designer
Deluxe Edition**

RATING ★★

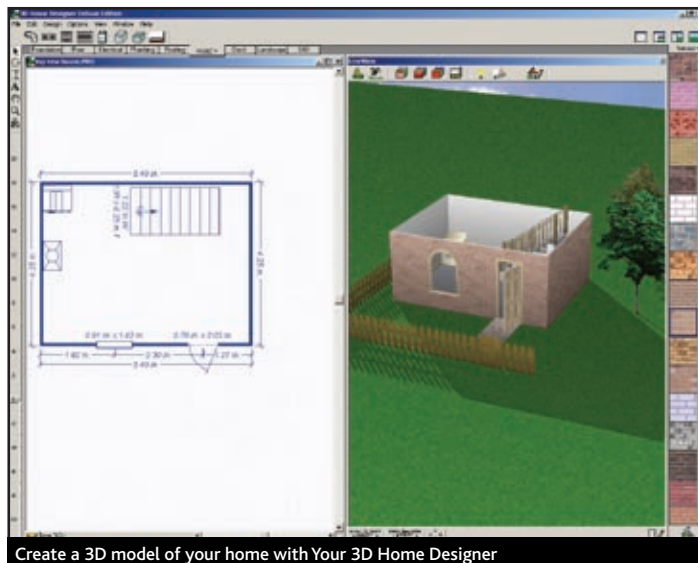
PRICE £9 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.ukDETAILS www.focusmm.co.uk

Almost everyone wants to improve their home in some way. According to the Office for National Statistics, the average British adult spends over 10 minutes a day on DIY-related activities. To help you with this, Your 3D Home Designer aims to take the guesswork out of DIY. It allows you to make a model of your home and view alterations in 3D before you've even driven to Homebase.

The first step towards creating a model of your home is to draw the foundations onscreen. A grid is available to help you gauge distances, and you can alter the scale to suit the size of your property. This is where things get difficult. Instead of an arrow or a crosshair, the cursor for drawing foundations is a caret: the shape used when positioning text in a word processor. This makes it impossible to judge where you're clicking, so your foundations and walls tend not to fit exactly on the gridlines.

This problem resurfaces elsewhere. Other important elements such as walls must be positioned with an imprecise mouse cursor. This problem is compounded by the fact that you can't



Create a 3D model of your home with Your 3D Home Designer

use the undo function to remove a badly positioned wall. We had to delete walls time and again. This isn't easy, as the walls are marked as dark blue lines. Foundations are also marked as dark blue lines, and with walls often positioned over foundations it can be hard to see which is which.

Once the walls are in place, you can add basic features such as windows and doors, and extras such as furniture, heating equipment and floors. You can view your plans in 3D at any point. The 3D view is basic, but it gives you a better impression of your building than the plans. You can click and drag textures on to the plain shapes to give the model more realism, but certain objects such as trees still seem like 2D images.

You can view your 3D model in two ways: above and from the ground. Unfortunately, both these views are extremely difficult to control. To move around, you have to click and drag with the mouse. We found ourselves charging about aimlessly on the ground or entering a nauseating spiral when looking from above. Controlling the elevation of your viewpoint using the mouse is similarly hit and miss and we often found it hard to get the view we wanted.

Focus Multimedia's Your 3D Home Designer Deluxe Edition is disappointing. Its scope is impressive, with enough 3D objects to create a detailed model of any home, but it's just too fiddly to use. Even at this price, it's difficult to recommend.

Tom Royal

✓ Cheaper than a tin of paint

✗ Hard to create layouts accurately

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/Me/2000/XP, 100MHz Pentium processor, 16MB RAM, 930MB hard disk. **Product code** 80009JHTXS

HOTLIST OFFICE SUITE**ABILITY SOFTWARE
Ability Office 4**

RATING ★★★★★

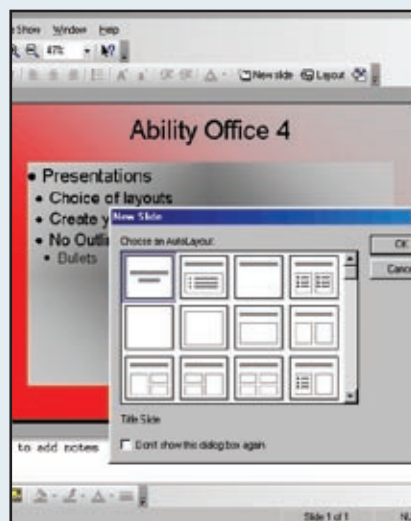
PRICE Professional Edition £50 inc VAT (upgrade £25); Standard/Small Business Edition £40 inc VAT (upgrade £20)

DETAILS www.ability.com

Buying an office suite doesn't necessarily mean spending a lot of money, as Ability shows us with its Office 4 suite. For just £50 for the Professional Edition, it undercuts the competition by a mile but still offers a functional package.

The latest version introduces the new Presentation program, which competes against Microsoft's PowerPoint. It's compatible with its competitor, bar a couple of features such as embedded video. This means that a few PowerPoint presentations won't open properly in Ability and you'll have to start your work from scratch. To facilitate this, Ability offers 20 slide layouts for slideshows.

The other big feature is Ability Mail. It's not included on the CD, but is available as a free download from the Ability website for registered users. It's the final piece in the puzzle for moving away from a Microsoft-based productivity suite.



Ability Office 4 also updates Ability Database. One of the strengths of the suite, the database now provides easier form design and reporting. Ability Write has the welcome additions of Autocorrect, Autotext and Grammar Checker. These features put the application on a par with Microsoft Word.

For the price it's very good value, although we recommend downloading the trial version to make sure all the features you need are present.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP, Pentium processor, 64MB RAM, 100MB disk space

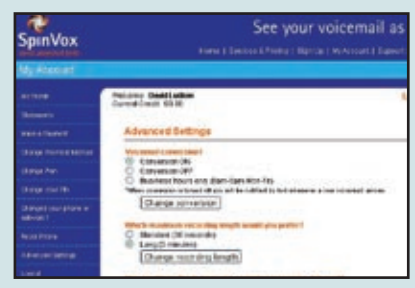
HOTLIST VOICE-TO-TEXT SOFTWARE**SPINVOX
Voice Powered Text**

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £5 per month for 20 messages
DETAILS www.spinvox.com

If you think that voicemail is an annoying way to receive messages, you'll love Spinvox's Voice Powered Text. This software converts all your voice messages to text files and sends them to you via SMS or email. The conversion is accurate and easy to follow. The basic £5 per month service should suit most people, but there are more expensive plans available for people who regularly receive more messages than this.

REQUIREMENTS Mobile phone and contract; internet connection to manage account online





REVIEW 3D GRAPHICS SOFTWARE

EOVIA
Carrara 3D Basics 2

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £80 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Computers Unlimited 020 8200 8282

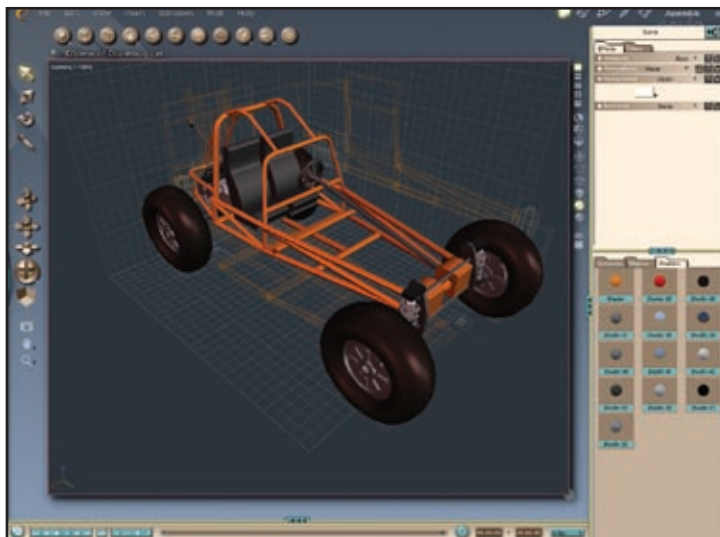
DETAILS www.eovia.com

Eovia has a tight hold on the 3D market with its range of highly specialised 3D programs, including Bryce, Amapi and Mimic. It also sells three different versions of Carrara, its general-purpose animation program. Carrara 3D Basics 2 is the baby of the range and is aimed at those new to 3D graphics.

3D Basics 2 is excellent value. It provides a huge range of 3D graphics and animation features at a great price. However, newcomers to 3D work will find it something of a mixed bag.

The program includes an extensive library of ready-made 3D models, including cars and aircraft, items of furniture and building components such as doors and windows. There are also predefined animations and special effects that can be applied to your graphics simply by dragging them out of the built-in browser and dropping them on to relevant objects in the main workspace window.

Version 2 of Carrara 3D Basics also adds several new features for creating impressive 3D graphics. The new Scene Wizard allows you to quickly create entire scenes containing elements such as sky and cloud backgrounds, complex lighting effects or 3D text. Some of these new features are specialised, such as the Tree Modeller, which allows you to create impressively realistic models of trees. You



Carrara Basics 2 is a powerful 3D graphics program, but unfortunately we found that its complex interface took some getting used to

have amazing control of the trees; you can alter the thickness of the trunk and even the size of leaves and the angle at which they hang. The program's Terrain Editor has also been modified, providing a similar degree of control when you create landscapes such as hills and mountains. But while it's easy to create these initial elements, the program struggles when you try to modify the objects you've created.

The interface is horribly complicated. The workspace is overcrowded with palettes and panels containing complex settings and parameters. Some of the individual modelling tools are also complicated, such as the Terrain Editor, which will

seem baffling to anyone with no experience of 3D software.

There are several ways of viewing the workspace window, depending on whether you're assembling the basic elements of a scene, working on a particular model or selecting texture or rendering options. It's easy to get confused as you move around and the program sometimes switches views automatically without warning.

Carrara 3D Basics 2 scores well for its features and value. However, Eovia needs to pay more attention to the basics, such as interface design and ease of use, to tempt new users into exploring the world of 3D graphics.

Cliff Joseph

✓ Powerful 3D graphics and animation tools at a competitive price

✗ Complex, confusing interface if you're not used to 3D graphics techniques

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, 300MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 300MB disk space. **Product code** C3DB2

HOTLIST ANTI-VIRUS SOFTWARE

F-SECURE
Anti-Virus 2005

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £26 inc VAT

SUPPLIER F-Secure 01223 478800

DETAILS www.f-secure.com

One of the cheapest anti-virus products on the market, F-Secure's Anti-Virus is also one of the best. Its interface is clean and easy to use, and when we downloaded infected emails its pop-up listed the viruses but didn't halt the rest of the download.

With excellent detection across the board, it's great value for money and worthy of our Best Buy award.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, Pentium II processor, 128MB RAM, 30MB disk space



HOTLIST DTP SOFTWARE

SERIF
PagePlus 10

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £100 inc VAT; £50 upgrade

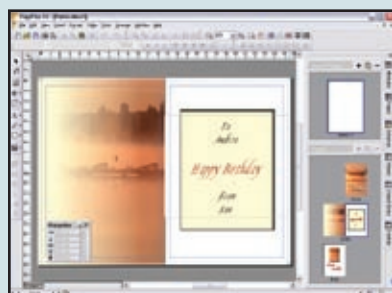
from any Serif product

SUPPLIER Serif 08003 767070

DETAILS www.serif.com

Serif's PagePlus 10 is aimed at the consumer who doesn't need the complexity of Adobe's InDesign. The latest version is even easier to use and allows anyone to create professional-looking publications. The price is similar to that of Microsoft's Publisher, but this product remains our favourite.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, Pentium processor, 256MB RAM, 300MB disk space. **Product code** B0002TS2Y



HOTLIST VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE

SONY
Vegas 6 +DVD

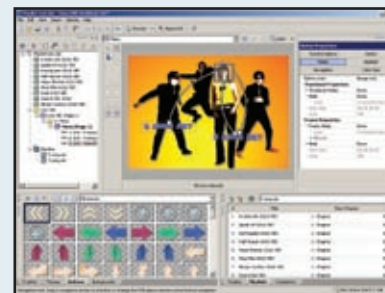
RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £440 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.sirentechology.co.ukDETAILS www.mediasoftware.sonypictures.com

Sony's Vegas 6 introduces a raft of new features. This professional editing platform includes comprehensive high-definition video (HDV) support. The program itself costs £300, but if you buy the production suite you'll get DVD Architect too. This software's lower price and excellent range of features give it the edge over Adobe Premiere.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 800MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 200MB disk space, DVD writer. **Product code** SON22359





REVIEW ORGANISER

LIFESTYLE SOFTWARE

LifeThemes

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £50 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.lifethemes.comDETAILS www.lifestyle-software.com

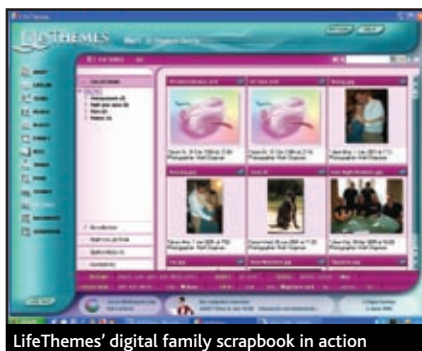
LifeThemes aims to help you sort out your cluttered life and keep a record of what's already happened, complete with pictures, documents, video and anything else you want to collect.

This software is targeted at families who use a single PC, allowing the user to create any number of logins on one computer. However, you'll need to buy another licence to install it on a second PC. Each user logs in using a password, but you can choose to let people see your diary or include them in specific entries. If you can get your kids to fill in their plans and future whereabouts, you'll never again have to worry about where they are – getting them to add these details is the hard part.

Getting started is easy. The printed guide is thorough and leaves nothing to chance. There are detailed explanations of everything, from the software functions to mouse manoeuvres. There's also a built-in tutorial that launches the first time you use the software. Advanced computer users should be able to find their way around without going through all that and the hardest thing to grasp is that you have to drag and drop an item to create a link rather than double-clicking it.



A password system keeps everyone's information safe



LifeThemes' digital family scrapbook in action

Handy Link icons let you connect items such as diary entries, pictures and videos to build up an in-depth entry for an event. Clicking on an entry shows all the things it's connected to for simple navigation. Some events such as birthdays or

holidays automatically appear in your Lifeline, which tracks your life and can be edited separately. There's even a basic family tree structure, allowing you to see where each member fits in.

Once you've put together a collection, it's like having a tiny version of the internet about your family but which can only be accessed on your PC. But the fact that you can't make the information accessible on the internet creates problems. For one thing, you can't see the information when you're away from your computer. There are plenty of free and easy ways to get a journal (www.blogger.com/start), pictures (<http://moblog.co.uk>) and even a diary (<http://calendar.yahoo.co.uk>) online, so

broadband users may want to bypass this software.

One function that should appeal to families is the ability to create a digital family scrapbook and burn it to a CD or email it to others. You don't need the LifeThemes software to view a scrapbook as it plays in a standard web browser. There aren't too many extra features aside from choosing captions and a themed heading, and all you get is a basic slideshow. Still, it's an easy way to bring together pictures, video, stories and other documents.

Matt Chapman



Organise your whole life in one place and link all relevant information together for easy access



No internet element

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP, 750MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 500MB disk space

HOTLIST CREATIVE & DESIGN SOFTWARE

ADOBE Creative Suite 2

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Standard edition £786 inc VAT

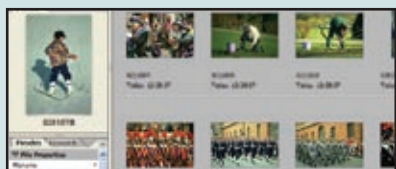
(upgrade £375); Premium edition £1,040 inc VAT (upgrade £500)

SUPPLIER Adobe 0131 458 6842

DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk

Creative Suite 2 is a superb bundle of high-end products, including Photoshop, InDesign and Live Trace. Each product's features complement each other and they are all neatly tied together under a single interface. Each application also features a range of new tools such as Photoshop's Vanishing Point tool, which makes photo editing in perspective much easier. This suite is great value compared to the standalone prices.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000 or XP with QuickTime 6.5, 500MHz processor (1GHz recommended), 384MB RAM (1GB recommended), 2.5GB disk space



HOTLIST VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE

ADOBE Premiere Elements

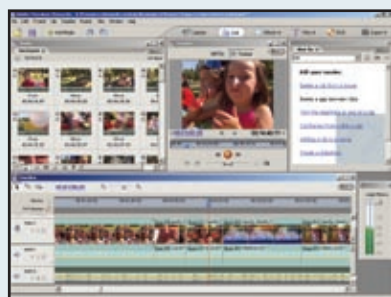
RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £53 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.savastore.comDETAILS www.adobe.co.uk

Premiere Elements is a cut-down version of the professional Premiere Pro video-editing application. It offers many of the same tools, and it's a powerful editing package. It is leagues ahead of other cheap editors and well worth buying if you have a DV camera and want to turn your footage into something special.

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP with SP1, 800MHz Pentium III or Athlon XP, 256MB RAM, 1.2GB disk space. **Product code** 25530008



HOTLIST HOSTING PACKAGE

1AND1 Microsoft Home

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £5.86 per month, £70 a year

DETAILS www.1and1.co.uk

If you want to run a website above and beyond the simple web space that you get with your ISP, you'll need a dedicated hosting package such as 1and1's Microsoft Home. You get 800MB of web space, 10GB of data transfers a month, a free .co.uk domain name and 300 email addresses. This web hosting pack, with its simple control panel and bundled scripts, is excellent value.

REQUIREMENTS Internet access, web browser





REVIEW REMOTE CONTROL SOFTWARE

3AM LABS LogMeIn



RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free; Professional version \$13

(around £7) per month

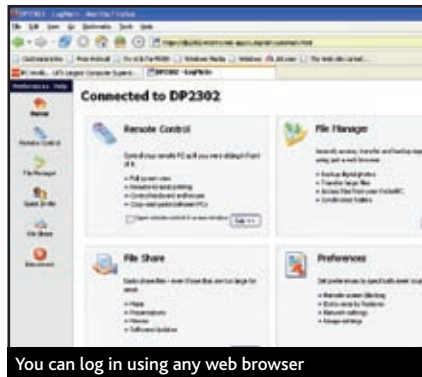
SUPPLIER www.3amlabs.comDETAILS www.logmein.com

We might be more mobile than ever, but there are always going to be times when we need access to our home PCs. There are plenty of paid-for remote access services available, but LogMeIn is one of the few services that do it for free.

It works by downloading a small application to your PC. This then communicates with the LogMeIn server as long as your PC is turned on. You can log in using any web browser. The service can use a Java application for the remote control, allowing you to use it from any web browser. However, it works best if you're using Internet Explorer, as this downloads an ActiveX control. As well as being faster to use, it also has more features, including remote synchronisation and local clipboards.

Remote connections are initially made through LogMeIn's servers, but a peer-to-peer connection takes over. This increases speed and takes pressure off the servers; we tested it using a PC connected to a 750Kbit/s broadband connection and it felt fast and easy to control. We only lost the connection a couple of times due to a poor internet connection, and we managed to reconnect straight away.

There's a full range of features, including the ability to lock the remote computer's keyboard and

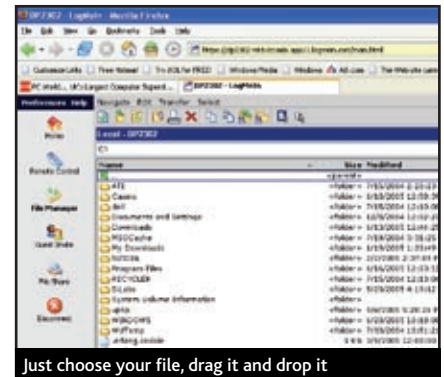


You can log in using any web browser

mouse, and blank out the screen. On disconnection, the software also locks the computer.

This basic version only allows you to remote-control your PC, nothing more. This is fine if that's all you want; you can always email yourself a file you've forgotten. But if you want a bit more control, you should upgrade to the Professional version. This costs \$13 (£7) a month or \$99 (£55) a year. It compares favourably with its competition, namely GoToMyPC, which is £12 a month. Upgrades are performed through your account so you don't have to install a new client on the target computer.

LogMeIn Pro has some strong features. The file transfer option is excellent and doesn't require you to get a remote desktop first. Instead, it's a separate option from your computer's LogMeIn homepage. The file transfer option uses two windows – one for the local computer and one for the remote – so you can just drag and drop files between the two computers. There's also a synchronise option, so you can keep two computers up to date. This is fast and worked well on our test PC.



Just choose your file, drag it and drop it

If you want someone else to have access to your files, you can share a file and send them an email link. File sharing can be restricted with a time limit or a maximum number of downloads, so you don't have to remember to turn the option off.

Finally, you can send guest invitations to your PC, which is useful if you want someone to help you fix a problem. It's similar to the Windows Remote Assistance tool, but it works through firewalls without any reconfiguration.

LogMeIn is an excellent piece of free software, and the Professional version is well worth the upgrade if you do a lot of remote work.

David Ludlow

✓ Simple remote control of a PC; free

✗ Java application not very fast

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, Internet Explorer, broadband internet connection

HOTLIST STEREO EDITOR

SONY Sound Forge 8

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £200 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.scvlondononline.co.ukDETAILS www.mediasoftware.sonypictures.com

Most audio programs let you work with multi-track recordings, but Sound Forge is a tried-and-true stereo audio editor. However, it now provides fast, precise audio-editing tools that are compatible with VST plug-ins. It is excellent value and remains the best stereo audio-editing program available.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 500MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 150MB disk space. **Product code** SFNRSB8000



HOTLIST WEB BROWSER

MOZILLA Firefox 1.0

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free

SUPPLIER www.firefox.com

Firefox 1.0 is by far the best web browser we've ever used. Introducing advanced features such as tabbed browsing and support for RSS feeds, it is leaps and bounds ahead of Internet Explorer. When you also consider that it's better at rendering pages and is more secure, there's little excuse not to use it.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, 500MHz Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 52MB disk space



HOTLIST UTILITIES SUITE

SYMANTEC SystemWorks 2005

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £45 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Symantec 01628 592222

DETAILS www.symantec.co.uk

Keeping your PC running properly is a difficult task made a lot easier by SystemWorks. A One Button Checkup feature gives your PC a thorough examination and fixes any problems it comes across.

With Norton AntiVirus to protect your PC and GoBack 4.0 to make regular backups, PC woes can be fixed quickly and efficiently.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, 180MB disk space, IE 5.5 or above. **Product code** B0002TS2ZY

